

Fall Meeting Content Impresses Attendees

ASPI's 11th Customer Alignment meeting received strong marks from attendees, who were impressed with the high level of customer access the meeting format provides. Hosted by Graphic Packaging International (GPI), the 2018 ASPI Fall Customer Alignment Meeting took place in Atlanta, GA this past October. "Very good exchange of ideas; extremely valuable to me as a supplier looking to break into GPI," noted one attendee on the survey collected at the meeting's conclusion. "Very good opportunity to interact with other suppliers and Graphic Packaging key personnel," noted another attendee.

ASPI launched the Customer Alignment Initiative in 2007 to help its member company executives improve their understanding of how primary producer customers develop their strategic directions. At each Customer Alignment Meeting, senior executives from these companies share how the supplier community can support their growth.

Day 1: Customer Up Close

The first day of programming was designed to give ASPI members unique insight into GPI and what the company is looking for from vendors. Steve Scherger, EVP and chief financial officer, kicked things off with an engaging corporate overview. Because GPI is a highly vertically-integrated company, most of the CRB, CUK, and SBS they produce is turned into packaging products that they sell, Scherger said. They've also made a recent entry into the paper cup business, which the company is "very excited about."

Scherger outlined three key strategic priorities that guide Graphic Packaging's path forward:

- Operational excellence: "We must be world class," Scherger noted;
- Re-investment in the business, which helps them drive productivity; and
- Capital allocation: acquisitions are an important part of the company's growth.

As the company grows, innovation will remain a focus. "Innovation can and does take many forms. We take it very seriously, and we'll be talking about your role in helping make it happen," Scherger told ASPI members.

GPI's Lena Zodda, marketing manager, spoke to attendees about Sustainability and Advocacy. "Like safety, sustainability is a core of what we do at Graphic Packaging," she said. "We believe we can have a business that's both profitable and sustainable."

Zodda shared with attendees some of GPI's biggest accomplishments in the sustainability arena. Notably, she discussed how the US Department of Energy's "Better Plants" program helped them achieve their targeted 25 percent reduction in energy use a full year early. Both the Macon, GA mill and the West Monroe, LA mill use 100 percent self-generated biomass energy.

Other presentation topics of the day included The Supplier's Role in Safety, Partnering with Graphic Packaging in Strategic Sourcing, and Capital Management at Work. (ASPI members always have access to shared meeting materials through the member online portal; check www.aspinet.org for availability.) All presentations included time for Q&A to increase attendee engagement.

The day ended with a Mill Managers Roundtable. Several mill managers were on hand to field direct questions from attendees, offering insights into topics such as building a mill workforce and working with suppliers on training resources. As one mill manager concluded, “I want suppliers who are going to come in and build relationships.”

Day 2: Interest-Focused

The second day of the conference began with a highly-rated presentation from Chip Dillon, Vertical Research Partners, who provided market overviews for the pulp, paper, and packaging industries, with a focus on the effects of online retail and capital growth trends. According to Dillon, China’s new wastepaper regulations are not sustainable over time—although that country is getting serious about its landfill issue. “I do think OCC will see a lift in the US over the next few years,” Dillon said. “And we like the paperboard space; we think the biggest plus right now is the potential to replace plastics.”

The Market Overview session was followed by a robust Q&A session. Attendees took advantage of the chance to have their specific market questions answered by an expert.

The remainder of the day gave attendees a chance to break into smaller groups for targeted discussions. Breakout sessions included Capital Investment, Chemicals/Materials, and MRO/Services. “This is the audience participation portion of our meeting,” said Moderator Anitra Collins, manager of technical services for Graphic Packaging. “These are the folks who buy your products, and they’re here to answer your questions.”

Throughout the event, members also experienced outstanding networking opportunities. In the words of one surveyed attendee, “I really enjoy the customer alignment meetings! Keep them going.”